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SUBJECT: Inter-Comoran Dialogue Ends

REF: ANTAN 153

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: After five days of talks on the constitution, institutions, and governance, the Inter-Comoran Dialogue closed March 7. While the recommendations are not binding, an overwhelming majority of participants insisted that President Sambi not seek to extend his mandate in the upcoming referendum. Union Ministers were inflexible on this point, insisting Sambi had the "last word" to ask the people for an extra year in office. The previously reported March 22 referendum date will likely slip but no new date has been announced. END SUMMARY.

Significant Accomplishments...

12. (SBU) The closing plenary March 7, like the opening March 4 (REFTEL) offered the podium to the Comoros' leadership spectrum: Union, island, civil society, religious, diaspora, workers, and traditional. The commissions on governance and institutions conducted rigorous work, identifying many problems and sources of dysfunction and making concrete recommendations. These discussions and reports, observers agreed, will serve as a point of reference for future work on reform in the Comoros.

13. (SBU) Dialogue participants agreed in principle that the Comoran system of government did not work and required a major overhaul. The disagreement was over timing and implications for unity. It was an accomplishment for the Dialogue that the final report faithfully indicated that "many participants" were against President Sambi's effort to extend his mandate via referendum. Their arguments against Sambi were also recorded: calling into question the rotating presidency (due to go to Moheli in 2010); violating the principle of non-retroactivity by allowing Sambi to benefit from the change while in office; and challenging Sambi's main argument about "harmonizing elections." Union Ministers present offered two arguments in defense, "we are the government, this is not illegal," and "Sambi's extension in office helps harmonize elections."

14. (SBU) There was consensus that governance and institutions were impaired by the "shared authority" provision of the 2001 constitution. In attempting to establish a federal structure, the constitution outlined specific Union (central) and island powers and authorities. However, for the sake of expediency, unresolved power designations were declared "shared," to be resolved later -- leading to paralysis. Participants also agreed a poor country like Comoros could not afford its expensive government structures (called "budgetivore"). Development was impossible with so many layers of government. Of course they differed on who was to blame: the islands said Sambi travels too much and the Union wastes money; the Union said the island "presidents" were unnecessary and costly.

...Several Key Failures

15. (SBU) The hoped-for direct meeting between President Sambi and the "opposition" island executives of Grande Comore and Moheli never happened. AU S/E Madeira pushed for such a meeting, but in the end President Sambi did not commit to a time.

¶16. (SBU) After efficient and organized commission reports to plenary on governance and institutions March 6, over eight hours on March 7 were devoted to (trying) to deliver the final report from the commission on constitutional reforms. Unlike the specific recommendations from the other two, the constitution report was vague. Former Prime Minister Bolero, head of the Mohelian delegation, declared, "if Sambi's referendum passes, he will only be president of Grande Comore and Anjouan." Even Anjouanese participants called on Sambi not to remain in office, saying they did not want another of their island's sons to lead the Comoros into crisis. Significantly several senior Imams, traditionally Sambi's constituency (he is a Muslim cleric), said the President's attempt to stay in office was illegal. Each time a Union Minister took the podium to defend Sambi's desire to remain in office, he was shouted down and the Dialogue chairman had to suspend the proceedings to restore order.

¶17. (SBU) March 5 and 6 constitutional commission meetings were attended by the leaders of all delegations -- clearly it was viewed as the most important. There were numerous heated exchanges and the Mohelian delegation finally walked out when the Union Ministers insisted Sambi had the right to seek to extend his mandate. A/U SE Madeira and Comoros Officer convinced the Mohelians to return for the plenary. Union Chief of Cabinet Dossar became irate when one civil society representative compared Sambi's referendum to Anjouan's Mohamed Bacar staying in power in 2007 -- calling it an insult.

¶18. (SBU) More generally, most Dialogue participants demonstrated ignorance about the Comoran constitution and laws; international legal experts frequently tried to guide the commission discussions

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and diplomatically point out erroneous legal assertions. Many speakers insisted that Mayotte was the first and only problem in the Comoros; that once France returned the island to Comoran sovereignty, stability and prosperity would be automatic. Some Comoran leaders disapproved of this simplistic view in private, but did not dare say so in public - the Mayotte distraction is illogical, impassioned, and incontrovertible to Comoran public opinion.

¶19. (SBU) Finally and unfortunately, women were not heard at the Dialogue. Despite a degree of economic empowerment in Comoran society, women remain relegated in politics and public debate. Each commission had female representatives present, but (by choice or custom) contributed little. The UN's appointment of a female "local expert" to one commission was barely tolerated. The one exception was that the Dialogue's chief reporter responsible for editing the final text was an influential woman, Amina Cheikh. Like elsewhere in the developing world, this diminished voice was disproportionate to women's responsibilities in the household and community in the Comoros.

COMMENT:
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¶10. (SBU) The Inter-Comoran Dialogue's final report will serve as a point of reference for all future political discussions in the Comoros. Without persistent pressure from the African Union and facilitation by several international partners, the Dialogue would never have occurred. A growing number of Comorans, not just politicians but also religious and civic leaders, are publicly calling on President Sambi to not seek to extend his term in office. No new date has been set for the constitutional referendum and it is unclear to what extent the GOC will incorporate Dialogue recommendations into their proposed revisions. The President and his top Ministers appear confident following recent ceremonies with Kuwaiti, Iranian, and other Gulf friends who will help them "build Comoros." END COMMENT.

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